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## Remembering in God's name: the role of the church and community institutions in the aftermath and commemoration of floods

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### Abstract

The incorporation of extreme weather events into a community's social memory is important for the community's perception of future risks, adaptive development of infrastructure, and ongoing social resilience. Connecting scholarship on the cultural understanding of weather and disaster risk reduction, this chapter uses archival records to explore the church's role in helping to inscribe tragic flood events into a community's social memory and regional history. Focussing on King's Lynn, England during the 1953 North Sea Floods, the chapter highlights the important role that the church played in the aftermath and subsequent intergenerational commemoration of floods in British communities.

### Introduction

Many academic studies of past disasters are case-study focussed and often do not consider the longer-term and broader social contexts in which the catastrophe may have occurred (e.g. Reilly 2009).<sup>1</sup> Such

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<sup>1</sup> Notable exceptions to this approach are Steinberg's (2006) *Acts of God: The Unnatural History of Natural Disaster in America*, Remes' (2015) *Disaster Citizenship: Survivors, Solidarity and Power in the Progressive Era* and Bankoff et al.'s (2013) *Mapping Vulnerability: Disasters, Development and People*.

an approach often treats extreme weather-caused disasters as non-recurring, one-off catastrophic events, which briefly cause societal breakdown and then disappear.<sup>2</sup>

What happens if we begin to consider these extreme weather events as cyclical occurrences, which have repeatedly challenged specific communities throughout their history? If we take such a viewpoint, and consider the longer history of, for example, a coastal community vulnerable to flooding, we begin to see that perhaps the social structures that precede the disaster, and seem to influence so greatly a community's ability to cope in its aftermath, have themselves been shaped by earlier flood events that afflicted the same community.

Informed by both the nascent literature on cultural understandings of climate, weather and extreme meteorological events, and the widespread literature on disaster risk reduction, this chapter aims to explore how, for one specific historical flood, local churches responded to immediate community needs, increasing social resilience. Further, given that the incorporation of extreme weather events into a community's long-term social memory is important for the community's perception of future risks, adaptive development of infrastructure, and ongoing social resilience (Blaikie et al. 2014, pg. 330-346), the chapter also aims to explore what role, if any, these religious institutions played in commemorating and embedding the floods within a longer historical narrative of the region.

The chapter focusses on the town of King's Lynn in Norfolk, south-east England (Figure 1) and the devastating flooding that occurred there as part of the widespread North Sea Floods of 1953. King's Lynn is a seaport situated on the tidal stretch of the river Great Ouse, close to where it enters the estuary and bay known as The Wash (Hunter-Blair 2001). The town lies on a greatly altered stretch of the river channel, which was originally diverted in the thirteenth-century (Richards 1812, pg.10-13). The Great Ouse empties much of the former marsh lowland of The Fens, which has been artificially drained by humans since at least the seventeenth-century (Knittl 2007). Due to its specific topography and its location within a water regime long altered by human intervention, King's Lynn has a long

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<sup>2</sup> Recent studies that highlight the importance of considering the broader societal contexts when presenting case studies on historical disasters include Morgan (in this volume) and Veale and Endfield (2016).

history of severe flood events caused by excessive rainfall, overland flow, storm surges and other incursions from the sea (Lamb and Frydendahl 1991; Pollard 1978, pg. 15).

*Insert Figure 1 here*

*Figure 1: Map showing the location of King's Lynn in the county of Norfolk and the counties location within England (inset).*

*(Image contains Ordnance Survey data © Crown copyright and database right and is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported](#) license)*

The narrative presented in this chapter is drawn from primary research into the records of three churches in King's Lynn (St Margaret's, Stepney and Union Chapel), local and regional newspapers (the *Lynn News & Advertiser* and the *Eastern Daily Press*), and local and national government records from 1953 up to the 1980s. The regional newspapers are held by the British Library in London, and represent a rich and often overlooked source for those interested in weather history. The church records, held at the Norfolk Record Office (NRO) in Norwich, and the government records, held at the National Archives London, whilst containing less content related directly to meteorological conditions, still present an understudied resource for those scholars prepared to persevere. By using these archival records to build a picture of the role local churches played in the aftermath and commemoration of the 1953 floods, and by putting these records into dialogue with scholarship on community resilience and community memory of disaster, this chapter aims to show how, in one historical and cultural context, religious institutions were crucial for social cohesion, community resilience and the long-term normalisation of flood events in the region.

In drawing a picture of the role of the churches in King's Lynn during and after the North Sea Floods of 1953, this chapter first introduces the details of the horrific events that began to unfold on the 31<sup>st</sup> January 1953. The chapter then details how the floods affected King's Lynn directly, and what role the churches played in the immediate disaster response and recovery of the community. Finally, the

chapter explores how the floods were commemorated by the churches and other cultural institutions in the years and decades following 1953. Before turning to the 1953 floods in more detail, I would like to first reflect on the literature relating to cultural understandings of climate and weather, cultural memory, disaster studies, and the commemoration of disaster in the United Kingdom.

### **Connecting conceptions of climate, cultural memory and disaster studies**

Over the last decade or so, scholars across the humanities have begun to explore what climate and climatic change means to individuals and specific communities (e.g. Janković and Barboza 2009; Raynor and Malone 1998; Geoghegan and Leyson 2012). As this scholarship has developed it has become apparent that a more detailed understanding of how individuals construct their conception of the climate, and how this is connected to their experiences of both everyday (de Vet 2013) and exceptional weather (Hall and Endfield 2016), is imperative to understanding how the public perceive climate change (Lorenzoni and Pidgeon 2006; Palutikof, Agnew, and Hoar 2004). Further, as Hulme (2014) has demonstrated, the increasing trend to attribute individual extreme meteorological events to anthropogenic climate change raises many issues about the ambiguous meaning of causation. This challenges us to explore the relationship between scientific and technological understandings of global systems, and everyday regional political and social realities (Hulme 2014).

Historians have begun to show how cultural and social understandings of both past climates (Behringer 2010) and historical meteorological extremes (Steinberg 2006) can illuminate current debates, and help to anchor contemporary literature on cultural dimensions of anthropogenic climate change within broader narratives of human-environment interaction.

Studies have shown that the specific ways that every day and extreme weather is remembered and recorded by a community, influences both how future generations understand the risk posed to them by extremes, and how individuals within the community perceive their climate and climatic change (Lorenzoni and Pidgeon 2006; Hall and Endfield 2016; Palutikof, Agnew, and Hoar 2004). Further,

studies have begun to show how tangible commemorations, such as physical markers or newspaper features, may be bound up with less tangible and more emotive or nostalgic tendencies amongst individuals in a community (Hall and Endfield 2015, pg. 14; Gorman-Murray 2010). Thus for a more complete understanding of a community's cultural memory of a disaster, and how this may relate to present community resilience and social cohesion, one must attempt to explore how physical actions in the aftermath of an event interacted with individuals' wellbeing and understanding of events (e.g. Baxter 2005).

Similar calls to embed meteorological extremes, and in turn catastrophes resulting from them, within broader studies of society and the everyday, have also emerged in the field of disaster studies (e.g. Blaikie et al. 2014, pg. 330-346). In recent decades this multidisciplinary domain has grown substantially, and now includes perspectives from economics (e.g. Merz et al. 2010), sociology (e.g. Rodriguez, Quarantelli, and Dynes 2009), anthropology (Hoffman and Oliver-Smith 2002), history (Steinberg 2006), and human geography (Blaikie et al. 2014).<sup>3</sup> These studies empirically investigate societal and community aspects of disasters, exploring communities' preparation, responses and resilience to floods, hurricanes and other extreme meteorological events. Such approaches have demonstrated that catastrophes are rarely caused by exceptional meteorological conditions.<sup>4</sup> The true risk posed by such a hazard is a combination of the probability of it occurring, the exposure of a community to the hazard, and the vulnerability of the community to its impact (Diaz and Murnane 2008, p.12).<sup>5</sup>

As disasters have been found to be influenced by a myriad of often controllable factors, studies on the vulnerability of communities to specific hazards have resulted in the emergence of the applied systematic approach of disaster risk reduction (DRR). Included in the Millennium Development Goals set by the UN in 2000 (Blaikie et al. 2014, pg. 325-327) and incorporated into their successor the

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<sup>3</sup> For an overview of disaster research across a range of disciplines see Quarantelli (1998).

<sup>4</sup> For more see chapters by Morgan and Waites in this volume.

<sup>5</sup> For more on this see Bankoff et al. (2013).

Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (United Nations, General Assembly, 2015, pg. 13-27), today DRR is used by many national governments, intra-governmental organisations including the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction<sup>6</sup> and non-governmental organisations, such as aid agencies. DRR aims to improve socio-economic vulnerabilities to disaster, while also reducing the risk posed by the environmental hazards that may trigger them. DRR aims to go beyond reactive emergency management, placing the improvement of a community's resilience to hazards at the heart of developmental, humanitarian and environmental programmes (UNISDR 2016).

A key part of DRR is intra-agency planning, which integrates non-governmental organisations, local communities, and other informal networks into disaster management strategies. As this approach has matured, over the last decade scholars have explored the specific role that non-governmental organisations have played in disaster. Empirical case studies have highlighted the role performed by such institutions and agencies in the immediate aftermath of disasters; when acting as part of an organised network (e.g. Moore, Eng, and Daniel 2003) or when performing informally in response to a catastrophe (e.g. Airriess et al. 2008). These studies have explored the characteristics of such non-governmental organisations that allow them to play pivotal roles in disaster management; characteristics such as their level of integration within a community, the level of trust or authority they hold within an ethnic or socio-economic group (Elliott and Pais 2006), the speed with which they can respond, and their knowledge of vulnerable locations and individuals (Blaikie et al. 2014, pg. 321-347). In short, these studies explore how community resilience in the aftermath of a disaster is connected to the community's preceding social cohesion and the strength of its social structures (Paton and Johnston 2006).

Although religious groups and institutions often exhibit many of the above characteristics, deemed crucial for successful disaster management and post-disaster community resilience, they are almost completely absent from all major recent international treaties and scientific literature on the subject

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<sup>6</sup> The United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction was founded in 1999, for more information see <http://www.unisdr.org/who-we-are/mandate> [last accessed 3 July 2016].

(Gaillard and Texier 2010). As part of a wider collection attempting to address this gap in the literature, Wisner (2010) suggests that though as yet little studied, faith groups do play an active role in the response, recovery, preparedness and prevention of disasters. Likewise, religious organisations are largely absent from historical narratives of disasters; where they do appear it is often in a moral or theological context (e.g. Steinberg 2006, pg. 12-19). An exception is Remes' *Disaster Citizenship* (2015), which for two technological disasters—the 1914 Salem fire, and the 1917 Halifax explosion<sup>7</sup>—explores in detail the role local churches played in immediate disaster response and more long-term social support. For as Remes' states:

People rarely record borrowing a cup of sugar from a neighbor...But when those same neighbors rescue each other after a disaster, people take notice and record the event. Disasters thus produce unusual records that document where people turned in times of trouble or crisis. Unions, churches, and mutual-aid societies...were not designed for disaster relief, but how they behaved in disasters shows us something about how they functioned. (Remes 2015, pg. 4)

Building on Remes' book, this chapter is an attempt to continue rectifying this gap in the literature, by exploring for one specific historical example how local churches provided vital social functions in the aftermath of a catastrophic flood.

Across communities up and down the length of the United Kingdom there are reminders of catastrophes and disasters passed. From physical statues and markers at memorial sites (Williams 2008, pg. 8), through to folkloric traditions, such as songs, poems and stories (Stein and Preuss in Hartman 2006; Griffiths et al., this volume) these reminders serve to commemorate the tragedy of lives lost, land and property damaged, community collapse and mistakes made. Whether physical or more ephemeral—referred to respectively as tangible and intangible cultural heritage (Boswell 2008,

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<sup>7</sup> The Great Salem Fire of June 25, 1914 was caused by an explosion at a leather company and went on to destroy 1,376 buildings, making some 18,380 residents of Salem, Massachusetts homeless, jobless or both (Remes 2015, pg. 54). While the Halifax Explosion occurred on 6 December, 1917 when a French cargo ship carrying explosives collided with a Norwegian steamer causing a fire and then an explosion, thought to be the largest man-made explosion before the atomic bomb, killing two thousand people (Remes 2015, pg. 21-22).



pg. 15)—such markers and reminders play an important role in intergenerational commemoration (Hall and Endfield 2016) and collective memory (Barnier and Sutton 2008).

The role that intangible cultural heritage plays in social and collective memory is not only limited to the commemoration of disaster; many commemorations exist as part of wider folk narratives on a region, its communities or specific ethnic groups. Cultural commemoration of disaster is a central and ancient feature of many folkloric traditions, including myths—for example the Genesis flood narrative (Good News Bible 1976, pg. 9-13), literature—for example Daniel Defoe's *The Storm* (Defoe 2005), poetry—for example the *Epic of Gilgamesh* (George 2003), and folk songs—for examples see “Disaster Songs” a catalogue of songs relating to disaster in Canada (Sparling 2012). The North Sea Floods of 1953 have been encompassed into such traditions, with most recently the rock band *British Sea Power* releasing an ode to the floods impact on the community of Canvey Island, Essex (Wilkinson 2008). With the onset of modern printing, recording, digitising and media sharing technologies, many of these previously oral traditions have now entered into more physical, but not necessarily more enduring, formats. Another important medium that often commemorates disasters are newspapers. Being geographically bound in coverage, often to a specific region or locale; and usually enduring for a substantial period of time, at least in generational terms, newspapers play an important role in commemorating events and generating regional narratives and histories (Zelizer and Tenenboim-Weinblatt 2014).

More tangible cultural heritage in the form of statues, plaques and other markers commemorating memorial sites of naturally triggered disasters and their victims, can be found all over the UK. Like the intangible formats discussed above, they perform an important role in intergenerational commemoration and collective memory, as well as a more direct function in land-use and town planning. Being reminded of the height of previous flooding every time you encounter the marker or knowing that a specific plot of farmland has never been built on because it is susceptible to sink-holes can save time, money, and also lives (see for example Sargent 1992, pg. 14).

Often outlasting technocratic solutions, such as governmental records or flood maps,<sup>8</sup> simple flood markers placed at the high water mark of floods, can be found hidden on village greens, community halls, churches, and monuments all over the UK.<sup>9</sup> It was one specific flood marker, in the entrance hall of St Margaret's Church in King's Lynn, Norfolk, which led me to begin thinking about the commemoration of disaster, alongside the empirical literature on community resilience and the role of local non-governmental organisations in disasters.

*Insert Figure 2 here*

<Figure 2: Flood markers in the entrance to St Margaret's Church in King's Lynn, Norfolk England.

Photographs: author's own >

The marker records the high-water level for all flooding that has afflicted the church since the nineteenth-century (Baxter 2005, pg. 1309), with the high water level from 1953—the worst natural disaster in twentieth century Britain (Hall 2015, pg. 2)—almost a foot below the mark of the less deadly and less well known 1978 floods (Figure 2).

The flood markers at St Margaret's clearly highlight the importance of preserving specific local information; reminding locals the area surrounding this church has had water higher than the national disaster of 1953 which claimed over 300 lives. Further, the discrepancy between the 1978 marker and the lower 1953 one, reminds us that flood depth is only one of many factors which contribute to the severity of a flood event, the damage it causes, and in turn its commemoration.

Floodplain conditions surrounding the church have altered significantly since it was first constructed in the early decades of the twelfth-century (Pevsner and Wilson 2002, pg. 460), with shops, homes, and businesses surrounding the building having been built by almost every generation since. Upon

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<sup>8</sup> For example the oldest flood marker in Rome dates back to 1277 (Aldrete 2007, Appendix I).

<sup>9</sup> For more on coastal flood markers please see the UK Coastal Floodstone Project at <http://floodstones.co.uk/>. The project is developing a database of UK flood markers to which readers can contribute [last accessed 15 Jul 2016].

visiting St Margaret's, I began to wonder how much the local community took note of these flood markers. Had the church, itself at the centre of life in the town both geographically and culturally, ever gone beyond the humble marking of flood-levels to commemorate the lives lost in past floods and to help embed these events within the cultural history and memory of the region? If the church had played a role during past floods, such as those in 1953, how had their role in the aftermath and years following the disaster interacted with and affected the community's resilience to future floods? In essence, as John Urry asks, how does the act of commemorating or remembering effect the society it occurs within, and "are these processes of collective remembering changing in the contemporary world...?" (Urry 1995, pg. 46)

Broadening out from St Margaret's church to include other local churches and religious organisations; I began by focusing my research on the role and function performed by these religious institutions during the North Sea floods of 1953.

## **The North Sea Floods of 1953 and their aftermath in King's Lynn**

The North Sea Floods of 31<sup>st</sup> January and 1<sup>st</sup> February 1953 were caused by the combination of a large meteorological depression and record spring tides (Hall 2011). The storm triggered a major storm surge, which flooded vast swathes of the east coast of Britain, the Netherlands and Belgium. In England alone it caused 1,200 breaches of sea defences resulting in over 160,000 acres of land being flooded, the evacuation of over 32,000 citizens, damage to 24,000 properties and 440 deaths (Hall 2015; Steers 1953; Baxter 2005).<sup>10</sup> In Belgium it caused 22 deaths and in the Netherlands, where the breaching of key dikes flooded vast areas of below sea-level polders, the storm surge resulted in 1,836 deaths (Gerritsen 2005).

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<sup>10</sup> Most scholarly accounts of the flood report total deaths in the UK of 307. However this total doesn't include the 133 deaths caused by the sinking of the MV Princess Victoria, which was caused by the same weather system. The true total death toll for the UK may be larger still, as it is not clear whether official statistics include several fishing vessels and their crews lost in the storm (Hall 2015, pg. 19).

The progression of the storm surge southward along the east coast of England was relatively slow, making first landfall at Spurn Head, Yorkshire at 16:00, yet not reaching communities further south, where most deaths occurred, until several hours later. For example, Canvey Island in Essex, where 58 deaths occurred, wasn't inundated until 01:10 on 1<sup>st</sup> February (Baxter 2005, pg. 1295). In spite of this significant lag time between the first landfall and the devastation caused further down the coast, no direct public warnings were issued, and each afflicted community had to deal independently with the deadly flood water (Hall 2011, pg. 389).

Much of the immediate rescue work was carried out by local authorities, communities, and military servicemen, both from the UK and US, based in the region (Baxter 2005, pg. 1300-1302). Although central government was initially slow to react, in the week that followed they declared the flooding a national disaster. Politicians and the national media were quick to invoke a wartime narrative of resilience and national solidarity (Hall 2011, pg. 390; Furedi 2007, pg. 238). Influenced by this, in the weeks that followed there was a national outpouring of support, with money, clothing and other sundries being donated from all over the country. The invocation of wartime narratives was familiar to all British citizens in this post-war context of austerity, where rationing was still the norm and infrastructure, including the very sea defences breached by the flood water, was still dilapidated (Hall 2015, pg. 3-4).

The storm surge reached its maximum at King's Lynn at 19.20 that evening, with its height at the town's harbour being calculated as somewhere between 2.5 (Steers 1953, pg. 285) and 2.7 metres above mean sea-level (Rossiter 1954, pg. 48). Approximately one-fifth of the town was inundated, around 1,800 homes were evacuated (Pollard 1978, pg. 44), and water as deep as 5.8 metres engulfed those properties closest to the main waterways (Figure 3). Despite the widespread inundation, casualties were relatively low, with only 15 deaths being recorded in the town (Pollard 1978, pg. 44). Although the flooding occurred after dark, the fact that many people had not yet gone to bed prevented further lives from being lost; a pardon that was not afforded many communities further along the coast.

*Insert Figure 3 here*

*Figure 3: County Planning Officer's hand annotated map depicting the extent of the 1953 flooding in King's Lynn, with the churches—St Margaret's, Union Chapel, and All Saints—highlighted (depths shown are in Feet). N.B. Stepney Church was located just to the north of St Margaret's, in an area not covered on this original 1953 map.*

*Source: NRO, C/P 3/2 (Used with kind permission)*

As the flood crippled communication lines along the east coast of Britain, and the national government's unpreparedness for such a catastrophe was exposed, each community had to rely on its own local networks. Local police, town councils and volunteers were central to immediate efforts to save lives, feed and shelter those who had spent the night exposed to the storm, and ultimately to collect and deal with the dead (Baxter 2005, pg. 1300).<sup>11</sup> Despite the relatively low number of casualties in King's Lynn, the town is the administrative centre for a large number of scattered rural communities in the region. Along the 15 mile coastal stretch from King's Lynn to Hunstanton alone there were a further 65 deaths (Baxter 2005, pg. 1298); the town became a hub for regional emergency response to the catastrophe.

Those churches in King's Lynn that hadn't been flooded, quickly became de-facto emergency centres, offering shelter, warmth and food to those who had lost their homes. With St Margaret's in central King's Lynn still under nearly two-feet of water,<sup>12</sup> it was the Union Chapel in South Lynn that became "the principle haven of refuge"<sup>13</sup> (Figure 3). Local churches were central to the collection

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<sup>11</sup> For more on the development of UK disaster communications in response to the 1953 floods, specifically the development of a national coastal flood warning system see Hall (2015) and Hall (2012).

<sup>12</sup> "The Vicar Looks Back." *Lynn News & Advertiser*, 6 Mar. 1953: pg. 7 [Print].

<sup>13</sup> Butler, F.W.J. "Church News and Views." *Lynn News & Advertiser*, 24 Feb. 1953: pg. 7 [Print].

and distribution of immediate aid and provisions; distributing food, clothes, and other sundries across the afflicted communities.<sup>14</sup>

Exploring in detail the response of regional community organisations, such as the churches in King's Lynn, helps build a more detailed understanding of how the response to the floods was delivered and understood by those involved. Like Remes (2015) this approach allows us to explore the importance of an institution central to the community in 1953, and in following how the community commemorated the floods, to track whether this importance and centrality remained in the decades that followed.

Whilst national media and government in 1953 focussed on the exceptional nature of the floods and the resilient wartime spirit with which communities responded (Hall 2011; Furedi 2007), the narrative which emerges at the community level in King's Lynn is one still centred on resilience, but also characterised by continuity and the normalisation of flooding in the region. Take, for example, the congregation of All Saints' church in King's Lynn (Figure 3), 24 of whom turned up for the service on the Sunday morning immediately after the overnight flooding. This is despite the church already being flooded to a depth of seven inches when the congregation had left Saturday Evensong. The Rector's home was also under three feet of water, but nevertheless he celebrated Holy Eucharist at 11am, and led the efforts of the congregation the following day to clean the church, so that it could be ready for the first funerals of victims on Wednesday 4<sup>th</sup> February 1953.<sup>15</sup> These events highlight the central role the church played in King's Lynn, both as part of the everyday routine and rhythm of the community, and also in times of disruption and dislocation. Through this one simple anecdote we see the churches embedded and valued place within the community, a characteristic heralded in disaster studies as strongly influencing community resilience and successful post-disaster recovery (Aldrich 2012; Blaikie et al. 2014).

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<sup>14</sup> "Queues in a chapel for food and clothes." *Lynn News & Advertiser*, 6 Feb. 1953: pg. 12 [Print].

<sup>15</sup> "Service held at All Saints' next morning." *Lynn News & Advertiser*, 6 Feb. 1953: pg. 8 [Print].

Alongside accounts of other non-governmental organisations such as the Red Cross,<sup>16</sup> the two local newspapers covered in detail the multiple roles local churches played in the immediate aftermath in King's Lynn. However, the church records themselves make very little reference to the floods. Where they do mention events of late January and early February 1953, the severity and exceptional human toll is noted, but across all of the meeting minutes and log-books it is given at most a paragraph of discussion.<sup>17</sup> This is despite the fact that the committee for Stepney Baptist church, which met only three days after the floods, calmly noted in their meeting minutes that, "[t]he Minister and Church Secretary left after tea because of a flood warning for their area".<sup>18</sup> The two main Baptist churches, Union Chapel and Stepney, did produce a joint memorandum commemorating the floods, yet rather than circulating this amongst their congregations, they decided that the report should "be placed in the Minute Books of both Union and Stepney Churches to act as permanent memorial of the catastrophe".<sup>19</sup> These somewhat humble and understated gestures hint at the normalcy of flooding and the threat from the sea in the longer history of the town and these congregations. The sea and its dangers were never far away from life in the region, and as community figureheads local rectors were only too familiar with the risks posed to their coastal congregations, many of whom made their livelihoods from the sea. Only six years earlier, the Reverend Canon R. L. Whytehead, now of St Margaret's in King's Lynn, had led a service live on the BBC Home Service commemorating those from the region who had died at sea during the Second World War.<sup>20</sup>

In the weeks that followed the floods, the churches—along with other local volunteer non-governmental agencies such as the Scouts and Junior St John Ambulance Brigades (Pollard 1978, pg.

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<sup>16</sup> "Red Cross to the Rescue." *Lynn News & Advertiser*, 6 Feb. 1953: pg. 10 [Print].

<sup>17</sup> See NRO FC 26/2, FC 69/24 and FC 65/9.

<sup>18</sup> Minutes of meeting held 3<sup>rd</sup> Feb 1953. *Union Baptist Church Minute Book, 1909-1967*. [minutes] Records of King's Lynn Stepney Baptist, NRO FC 65/9.

<sup>19</sup> Butler, F.W.J. (1953) *The Flood of January 31<sup>st</sup>, 1953*. [memorandum] Records of King's Lynn Union Baptist, NRO FC 26/2.

<sup>20</sup> Whytehead, R.L. (1947) "Harvest of the Sea." 19 Jan. 1947. *Radio Times* [online] BBC Genome. <http://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/809ab8cf05c84ba1af9070760341fab> [Accessed 16 Jul. 2016].

94)—continued to play a central role in relief efforts. All of the main congregations established their own disaster relief funds for those within their catchment and of their particular denomination. The church leadership promoted the plight of those in the region through national and international forums, including the Anglican national church assembly held in London <sup>21</sup> and BBC newsreel footage of the region, which featured coverage of a procession to a memorial service at All Saints' church.<sup>22</sup> The widespread coverage of the floods, coupled with the large death toll meant that soon churches across the afflicted region were receiving donations from congregations as far afield as Durban in South Africa.<sup>23</sup>

In addition to their involvement with physical relief efforts, the churches also played an important and cathartic social role in helping the communities to deal with the emotional and psychological trauma of the disaster. Recent sociological and psychological studies of disaster have shown that such support is integral to a community's social resilience and post-disaster recovery (Davis et al., 2015; Pitt 2008, pg. 357-366).

Although even as recently as the UK floods of 2007, there was criticism of a lack of psychological support provided for flood victims (Pitt 2008, pg. 357-366), support services such as counselling and community support groups are now a formal part of disaster response and relief efforts in relation to flooding in the UK (Public Health England 2014). Indeed, the foundation of much of the UK's disaster policy, planning and management today was created in response to the 1953 floods (Hall 2011, pg. 397-399; Waverley 1954). Yet in 1953 such co-ordinated and formalised provision of post flood support for trauma or bereavement was non-existent (Baxter 2005, pg. 1303-1305). As interviewees featured in a BBC documentary on the flooding reveal, the results of this internalised suffering can be profound, "typified by the two surviving Manser family members, who lost three siblings that fateful night, stating that they have lived their lives without closure because their parents

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<sup>21</sup> "Lynn Vicar's Church Assembly plea for flood sufferers." *Lynn News & Advertiser*, 17 Feb. 1953: pg. 7 [Print].

<sup>22</sup> "Magdalen Lynn on television." *Lynn News & Advertiser*, 17 Feb. 1953: pg. 5 [Print].

<sup>23</sup> Wellington, W. L. (1953) Letter to The Rector St John's Church. [letter] File of correspondence relating to flood damage, mainly to the church, NRO PD 171/82.



never spoke of events, and they did not even know where their siblings were buried until fifty years after the flood” (Hall 2011, pg. 403; BBC 2002).

Unfortunately direct records of the informal emotional and psychological support local churches provided, in lieu of more formal post-flood support, is limited to the occasional quote from a memorial service or mention of support groups in local newspapers. In one such instance, the rector of All Saints’ Church, the Reverend W.G. Bridge, reflected:

Rescue work has been followed by efforts of rehabilitation, but through it all there has run a theme—the love of the community for all those who belong to it. That brotherly love has shown itself not least in our mourning for our dead.<sup>24</sup>

Through these limited glimpses in the archival record we can see that the social and community support role played by the churches in King’s Lynn, although informal and ad-hoc, was of great value to the community, and ultimately seems to have increased social cohesion and resilience in the aftermath of the tragedy. For community members, the church was a space that combined a sense of belonging tied to a specific place, with personal faith, which in the aftermath of the floods proved important for both physical and emotional resilience.

## Commemorating the 1953 floods in King’s Lynn

All of the churches in King’s Lynn continued to play a central role in funerals, memorial services, and the distribution of relief in the months that followed the flooding. Yet beyond the individual families who lost loved ones, for the wider community the floods quickly became another flood from their past, an accepted event in the region’s history. There is no evidence in either the local press or church log-books that the floods were commemorated on their one, two or five year anniversaries. In fact the three churches log-books I have been able to locate contain no mention of any commemoration

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<sup>24</sup> Bridge, W.G. (1953) Quoted in: “Memorial service at South Lynn church.” *Lynn News & Advertiser*, 10 Feb. 1953: pg. 1 & 5 [Print].

ceremonies or services after 1953. However, it is worth noting that these log-books do not document the content of every individual sermon, and so we can perhaps speculate that some of the reverends in King's Lynn may have dedicated a prayer to victims on these initial anniversaries.

From the archival record, however, it is clear that in the initial months and years that followed the floods, while communities were vociferous about the failings of infrastructural and government response (Pollard 1978, pg. 93-106; Hall 2012, pg. 124-166), there was also a desire and urgency to return to normal as quickly as possible. Throughout 1953 and into 1954, many victims faced problems with insurers paying out for damages, slow progress on repairing homes due to post-war shortages, and living in temporary accommodation for more than six months after the floods (Pollard 1978, pg. 96-100).

Contemporary studies have shown how social capital—"the networks and resources available to people through their connections to others"—plays a vital function in post-disaster recovery (Aldrich 2012, pg. 2). Although I do not wish to directly and anachronistically apply this modern concept to events of 1953, the disparities in post-disaster recovery and their relation to individual's access to social resources, social networks and social capital evident in modern case studies (e.g. Aldrich 2012), echoes disparities evident in 1953. Disparities between recovery in towns such as King's Lynn and smaller rural communities, between middle-class and working class victims, and between those integrated into community networks, such as church congregations, and those living on the margins are all evident and remarked upon in accounts of survivors (Pollard 1978; BBC Radio Norfolk 1993; BBC 2002).

Although victims were commemorated with physical markers, statues and plaques in nearly every afflicted town or village along the north Norfolk coast, beyond 1953 other forms of commemoration are not evident from the region's archival records. The earliest evidence of widespread commemoration first appears in 1973 on 20<sup>th</sup> the anniversary of the floods, and is led largely by the local and regional press. Most notably, the *Eastern Daily Press*, a title covering the whole county of

Norfolk, produced a four-page commemoration supplement on the 1973 anniversary, which was much more critical of events in 1953 than the contemporary media coverage had been.

From our vantage point in the present, the gap between the floods and the first press commemoration may seem like a relatively long time, but we must remember that by the 1970s many aspects of the floods were still fresh and emotionally raw for those still living and working in the region. As Pollard reflected in 1977:

Many East Anglian families, and not only those who lost loved ones, are still psychologically marred by the disaster. For some there are occasional physical reminders, as on one Norfolk farm where the plough still, nearly twenty-five years later, occasionally turns up pots of ink, bottles, combs and other items from...the sea...A continuing souvenir for thousands of homeowners in the coastal towns and villages is the difficulty of decorating walls which were saturated with sea-water and will, according to expert advice, never again take and hold paint or paper satisfactorily (Pollard 1978, pg. 8).

The twenty year gap between the floods and their commemoration in the regional press may reflect the importance of oral traditions and intergenerational narratives in the commemoration of extreme weather events (Hall and Endfield, 2016). The interactions and dynamics between individual memories, collective memories, and longer more formalised histories of a region, which may result in an event being commemorated or forgotten, are indeed multiple, bespoke and complicated.<sup>25</sup>

Five years later, the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary received significant press coverage as it occurred just weeks after the 1978 floods, which again subjected the region to extensive coastal flooding. As highlighted by the flood markers at St Margaret's church (Figure 2), although less widespread in their devastation, the 1978 floods did cause significant damage in King's Lynn and several other locations along the north

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<sup>25</sup> For more on the complexity of this relationship, see the 2008 special edition of the journal *Memory*, "From individual to collective memory: Theoretical and empirical perspectives," edited by Barnier and Sutton. Available online at <http://www.tandfonline.com/toc/pmem20/16/3> [last accessed 12/07/2016].

Norfolk coast.<sup>26</sup> Nationally, the 1978 floods were hailed as a success for the changes made to warning systems, sea defences and disaster planning post-1953, but regionally, there was still plenty of criticism of the government's response (see Hall 2011, pg. 394-404). The coverage of the 1978 flooding and the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of 1953, highlight how socio-economic and political circumstances had changed in King's Lynn during the intervening years. Whilst the damage to the physical building of St Margaret's church and its clean-up was covered in the regional press,<sup>27</sup> there was no mention of commemorative services, and reflecting wider trends of secularisation, the church hierarchy no longer had a presence in print, as the "Church News and Views section" in the *Lynn News & Advertiser* had been discontinued.

Further, the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary is used by the newspapers as an opportunity to criticise both the local and national government's preparedness and response to the 1978 floods.<sup>28</sup> The most telling example that the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary occurred in a more secular, individualistic, and relatively prosperous period, is the response to the local Salvation Army's relief efforts; just as in 1953 the Salvation Army in King's Lynn collected furniture and clothing for those in need. However, unlike in 1953, when people queued to receive the donations, in 1978 no-one came to collect any of the donated items.<sup>29</sup> With the organisation left with a hall full of donated shoes, clothes and furniture, the organiser felt aggrieved when local communities complained no-one was helping them. He lamented: "People seem to want a cash settlement. But we have no money to hand out. We have just done what we can to help the problem as we understood it."<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> For largely comparable accounts of the meteorological and hydrographical conditions in both 1953 and 1978 see Steers (1953) and Steers et al. (1979).

<sup>27</sup> E.g. "Church clean-up." *Lynn News & Advertiser*, 27 Jan. 1978: pg. 2 [Print].

<sup>28</sup> "25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of flooding threatened nightmare repeat" *Eastern Daily Press*, 30 Jan. 1978: pg. 7 [Print].

<sup>29</sup> "Salvation Army wants to help" *Lynn News & Advertiser*, 3 Feb. 1978: pg. 2 [Print].

<sup>30</sup> "Lynn victims' second chance for SA help" *Eastern Daily Press*, 2 Feb. 1978: pg. 18 [Print].

The centrality and importance of the role played by the churches in King's Lynn in the recovery from the 1953 floods becomes much more apparent when it is considered alongside 1978. The different and often more marginal role the church played in the aftermath of the 1978 floods, reflects studies on secularisation in the UK, which identify the 1960s as a key decade for the receding importance of the church across many areas of British life (Brown 2013, pg. 170-192). Rather than simply being related to a purported general secularisation of British society in the period, most often measured in declining church attendance and religious adherence figures (e.g. Voas and Bruce 2004; Voas and Crockett 2005; Voas 2009), the different role the church played in the aftermath of the 1978 floods in King's Lynn, perhaps reflects more nuanced changes in the town's social structures. Green (2011) argues for a more socially informed history of religion, demonstrating the importance of integrating church trends within their myriad of social influences, which most notably in the post-war decades includes the expansion of the welfare state. In the context of the 1953 and 1978 floods in King's Lynn, the expansion of organised state services, is observed through the creation of both national and regional weather warning systems and governmental disaster plans in the aftermath of the 1953 catastrophe (Hall 2015; Johnson et al., 2005). In providing this disaster specific support, along with more general increases in social-welfare, the state took up many of the responsibilities that in the immediate aftermath in 1953 had been picked up by the local churches. The changing role of the churches in King's Lynn in this period, highlights not only a local shift in community identity and its consequences for social cohesion and resilience, but also reflects larger changes across Britain relating to secularisation, tradition and the stability of regional identity.

Whilst the churches were largely absent from the documented longer term commemoration of floods, their role in the immediate aftermath must be considered as part of a process which embedded the floods into the region's collective memory and regional history. Beyond the tangible heritage created by the flood markers, we have seen that the churches played a central role in the intangible cultural heritage of the floods, contributing to their position within a broader collective memory and history of the region.

## Conclusion

Whilst perhaps frustrating for academic enquiry, the limited and sporadic archival evidence of the churches' role in the aftermath and commemoration of the 1953 floods in King's Lynn is in itself important. The lack of records shows that what the church was doing, even during this time of disruption and catastrophe, was a normal role for it to undertake within the community. In a town and wider region whose history has been defined by water and the sea, including repeated flooding, the role of the churches in 1953 was both essential and yet literally unremarkable.

We have seen that by being supportive, resolute, and avoiding the superlatives of the media coverage, whilst also providing a forum for the expression of emotions, the churches and their associated community groups helped to normalise the flood and situate it within a longer history of repeated flooding in this low lying region. By performing this function during the immediate aftermath, the church helped to situate the 1953 floods within the region's historical narrative, helping to ensure future commemoration would occur and that this commemoration would not just focus on the tragedy of the flood, but would rather present a narrative which centred on the overcoming of adversity, social resilience and community social values. Given the ongoing success of the town of King's Lynn and the limited damage from flooding in the post-1953 era, this case study supports the idea that the incorporation of extreme weather events into a community's long-term social memory is important for the community's perception of future risks, adaptive development of infrastructure, and ongoing social resilience.

Whilst there is evidence of how the church affected the inter-generational memory and commemoration of events, the difference between their role in 1953 and the 1978 floods has highlighted the challenges of exploring inter-generational and collective memory. The shift of the churches from institutions at the centre of support networks in 1953, to more peripheral actors in 1978, reminds us that history is not a static scene from which we can cherry-pick case studies. Any serious study attempting to understand how past extremes of weather have been survived, understood and commemorated by communities, must place events and actors within broader cultural and social

histories (Remes 2015, pg. 4). Given the changing role of the church over much of the UK during the twentieth-century, it is further suggested that future historical studies of disaster of this period should continue to explore the churches' role. In this instance, the church has provided a means of capturing the flux of social "networks of solidarity and obligation" (Remes 2015, pg. 4) so central to contemporary studies on social resilience, yet so often absent from the historical record.

Events in King's Lynn in the aftermath of the 1953 floods have highlighted that a cultural memory of extreme weather and disaster events may only endure through the complex combination of various mechanisms across a variety of mediums. We have seen that for this case study an intergenerational narrative, specific to the town and region, was only formed through a mixture of oral narratives, regional newspapers, physical markers, and importantly the actions of community networks led by non-governmental organisations, in this instance the church.

Although occurring in a time before widespread acceptance of the threats posed by anthropogenic climate change, the narrative presented still informs us about how we should approach meteorological extremes and their commemoration within a community. In line with other recent literature (Hall and Endfield 2016; Hulme 2009), this chapter reminds us that when interacting with communities in relation to climate change, we should avoid the abstract and not undervalue the importance of local understanding, social memory and experience of previous meteorological extremes.

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